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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

MOVING-PICTURE POETRY¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

SINCE the famous discovery of Paris by Mr. Richard Harding Davis some years ago, there have been few more edifying happenings of a similar kind than the recent disclosure, by our always alert "general public" and our no less alert newspaper paragraphers, of a strange and hitherto unheard of poetic phenomenon: "*vers libre*." Letters to the papers from sarcastic and jocose readers, parodies by the paragraphers, solemn discussions by reviewers, have marked this momentous emergence into public view of a novel and arresting verse-form. There have even been anxious editorials on the subject; and the inexhaustible "F. P. A." has charmed the discussion with the breath of inspiration by turning the weather report into "free verse," and by confessing, in a deathless phrase, that, since he could not like "free verse," he must be suffering from hardening of the fine-arteries. A generation hence, inquisitive and patient students of the history of poetic art will learn with astonishment that *vers libre* was discovered by America in the second decade of the twentieth century.

But whether "free verse" is something new or something old is not so important as the fact that its present condition has yielded at least one remarkable creative product—we mean, of course, the extraordinary *Spoon River Anthology* of Mr. Edgar Lee Masters.

It is apparently not yet agreed what Mr. Masters' book is,—except that it is "free verse." Convinced that it is certainly not poetry, and horrified by its content and structure, the æsthetic Calvinists have exhorted Mr. Masters to

¹*Spoon River Anthology*, by Edgar Lee Masters. The Macmillan Company, New York, 1915.

be still, in the spirit of the command of the immortal ship-captain to his mate: "What I wants of you, Mr. Coffin, is SILENCE, and damn little of that." But Mr. Masters is unlikely to oblige. It is extremely doubtful if silence is his long suit. Certainly it is not a conspicuous characteristic of his *Spoon River Anthology*, which is nothing if not articulate and alive and what we have a fancy to call psychically reverberatory. In this village *comédie humaine* are assembled the life histories of the inhabitants of Spoon River, and the overtones of the jangling music of these spent lives reverberate from page to page, clash and re-echo, attaining at times a poignancy which we do not quite know how to regard or appraise.

They speak to us from their graves, these Spoon River people:

Where are Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley,
The weak of will, the strong of arm, the clown, the
boozer, the fighter?

All, all, are sleeping on the hill.

And when, through Mr. Masters, they have spoken, we know them beyond the power of forgetting; their actuality is amazing: Isaiah Beethoven, Flossie Cabanis, Aner Clute; Willard Fluke and Fiddler Jones; Serepta Mason, Hamlet Micure, Peleg Poague and Mrs. Purkapile; Tennessee Claflin Shope, Margaret Fuller Slack, Jonathan Swift Somers, W. Lloyd Garrison Standard, and Hod Putt. We know not if Mr. Masters be an authentic genius; but there is genius of a kind in these superb names. What an inspired nomenclature is here: Flossie Cabanis, Isaiah Beethoven, Georgine Sand Miner, Pelig Poag, Lydia Puckett, Hod Putt. What portraits they evoke!

Throughout two hundred and fifty pages this unique human comedy unfolds itself—the life of Spoon River and its men and women, its girls and boys. The *Anthology* has a microcosmic completeness. We hear, told by themselves, the life-histories of village belles and grocer's clerks, farmers and farmer's wives, travelling salesmen, lawyers, blacksmiths, school-girls, politicians, tramps, doctors, bank-presidents, druggists, the village poetess, the village dandy, deacons, school-teachers, saloon-keepers, preachers, adulteresses and Sunday-school superintendents, hired girls and circuit-judges, newspaper editors, whores, bullies, grafters, crooks, murderers, gamblers, wantons, drunkards, ne'er-do-

wells, dreamers, idealists, wastrels and paupers and prudes. Here are tragedies, sordid or touching, horrible or grim; pitiful romances, scandals, little histories of violence and tenderness, of patient waiting and rebellious enduring; grotesque comedies, preposterous melodramas; a humanity that is universal.

You see that tragically ill-assorted pair, Benjamin Pantier and Mrs. Pantier—lonely and hostile souls: he, driven from home, living with his dog Nig in a room back of a dingy office:

. . . She, who survives me, snared my soul
With a snare which bled me to death.

But now hear Mrs. Pantier:

I know that he told that I snared his soul
With a snare which bled him to death . . .
But suppose you are really a lady, and have delicate
 tastes,
And loathe the smell of whiskey and onions . . .

There was Benjamin Fraser, who was tortured by life, oppressed by sex:

Their spirits beat upon mine
 Like a thousand butterflies

I closed my eyes, yet I knew . . .
. . . when their garments clung to them,
Or fell from them in exquisite draperies.

There was Minerva Jones, the village poetess, whom "Butch" Weldy captured and whom he left to her fate with Doctor Meyers,—“good-hearted, easy,”—who tried to help her out; but she died. And we hear from Mrs. Meyers that, though her husband protested all his life long that the newspapers lied about him villainously, and he was not at fault for Minerva's fall, but only tried to help her, she held him to be nought but a poor soul sunk in sin. We turn a few pages, and out of his earthly cell speaks Frank Drummer, the village fool, who tried to memorize the *Encyclopedia Britannica*; and we observe with admiration that Mr. Masters is the first poet who has dared to put, not only the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, but Henry George, Free Silver, the Peerless One, and Prohibition, into serious verse, as you will see by turning to the life history of poor George Trimble.

politician, who was hectored by his wife, and died a disappointed and futile being:

For the radicals grew suspicious of me,
And the conservatives were never sure of me.

—the eternal tragedy of the trimmer!

There was Harold Arnett—wretched, sick-souled failure, who, weak from the noon-day heat, heard the cry of a baby,

Then the violent voice of my wife:

“ Watch out, the potatoes are burning! ”

I smelled them . . . then there was irresistible
disgust.

I pulled the trigger . . .

. . . thus I came here.

And for a companion piece, consider Margaret Fuller Slade, who “ would have been as great as George Eliot but for an untoward fate.” She married John Slade, the rich druggist, thinking thus to secure leisure for her novel; but she bore eight children, and had no time to write, and ran a needle in her hand while washing the baby’s things, and died from lock-jaw—“ an ironical death.”

What Mr. Masters has accomplished is the cinematographing of narrative-verse. He has reversed the practice of the moving-picture people,—who give us stories in picture-form,—and offers us a kind of moving-picture in the form of fictional verse. The *Spoon River Anthology* is a series of vivid, concentrated, rapidly shifting visualizations, related and interwoven, and employing that favorite device of the screen-play: a single event exhibited from different dramatic angles. You get, for example, Aner Clute’s story of how she happened to “ lead the life ”: well, it was a silk dress, and a promise of marriage from a rich man (Lucius Atherton); and because they gave her the name for it, why, that made her what she was. You get, then, Lucius Atherton’s picture flashed on the screen: the former town dandy,—“ an excellent knave of hearts who took many a trick,”—now old and shabby, living at the village restaurant; “ a gray, untidy, toothless, discarded, rural Don Juan.” But this is not all: Homer Clapp is put before you, begging of Aner Clute a parting kiss at the gate—a kiss that she refused, “ saying we should be engaged before that ”; but no sooner had he gone (so he learned afterward) than Lucius Atherton stole in at her window. So he died cursing himself for one of

Life's fools, "whom only death would treat as the equal of other men."

Just what relation Mr. Masters' cinematographic verse bears to poetry it is not easy to declare with confidence. We have said somewhat of the substance of his book, nothing of its form. Here is a fair sample of it at its most characteristic—it is Deacon Taylor speaking:

I belonged to the church,
And to the party of prohibition;
And the villagers thought I had died of eating water-melon.

In truth I had cirrhosis of the liver,
For every noon for thirty years,
I slipped behind the prescription partition
In Trainor's drug store
And poured a generous drink
From the bottle marked
"*Spiritus frumenti.*"

Clearly this is as remote from poetry—the poetry of Whitman no less than the poetry of Swinburne—as the music of young Mr. Leo Ornstein is remote from the music of Chopin. It is perfectly easy to conclude that it is not poetry at all. To call it "free verse" is as idle as it would be to call it blank verse, or a sonnet. Nine-tenths of the *Spoon River Anthology* is, as verse, equally bald, flat, and uncouth. Occasionally it attains a measure of grave eloquence, an exaltation of speech that is seen at its best in the picture of Isaiah Beethoven, with but three months to live, brooding in the darkness by the mill-stream, where

The flame of the moon ran under my eyes
Amid a forest stillness broken
By a flute in a hut on the hill.

But there is little in the book that is of this fibre. Most of it is of a piece with the "Deacon Taylor" passage. So, reading about the trial of Dr. Duval for the murder of Zora Clemens, we come back to the question that disturbs us throughout most of the *Anthology*: If this is poetry:

Alas, that love, so gentle in his view,
Should be so tyrannous and rough in proof!

what, then, is this?—

It was clear he had got her in a family way;
And to let the child be born
Would not do.

When, in Whitman, we weary of reading that

The President holding a cabinet council is surrounded
by the great Secretaries,

we can turn a few pages and find this:

I am he that walks with the tender and growing night.

.
Smile, O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth!

Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!

There are no such compensations in Mr. Masters' verse. You will seek there in vain for what Stevenson called the "unexcelled imaginative justness of language" that is in Whitman. The *Spoon River Anthology* prevails—seizes you, engrosses you, haunts you—not because of its verse, but in spite of it. It is often as rank and as candid as the records of a police-court; but it is ineluctably detaining, at times extraordinarily moving. It is a miracle of veracious characterization; fiction of an unexampled kind; a new thing under the sun. But why drag in poetry?

LAWRENCE GILMAN.